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ABSTRACT

Three external degree programs--National Ed.D. Program for Educational Leaders, Nova University (Florida); University External Studies Program, University of Pittsburgh; and Field Centered Courses, Department of Early Childhood Education, Kent State University--are compared on the basis of a series of questions. Is the course designed for a specific audience? Does the course link theory with practice? Are the objectives of the course clearly specified for the student? Are the students encouraged to help one another? Are preassessment instruments utilized to identify the student's strengths and weaknesses? Does the student complete the course at an individual rate? Does the student receive continuing feedback from the instructors? Does the student attend "on campus" seminars? The major conclusions of the study are that the learning environment can be expanded to include the school community setting and that the external studies as a format can be designed to match the needs and learning styles of many kinds of students. (JMF)

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Three University External Studies Courses:
An Analysis

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Introduction

In that distant age when university study trained for medicine, law and the church, and when the resources for learning were books and the brains of a few scholars, External Studies had no real meaning. There was but one place to receive learning. The books which comprised the library of the early university were the treasure and the magnet which attracted the scholars who gathered around them. Much has changed since that time: books are widespread; communications are swift and available; and, learning theory has broadened our perspective of how to teach. Our purposes for universities have multiplied. And now, many universities for differing reasons have begun to explore an external mode of study for some of their students. Much rhetoric about the role, worth, and implications of External Studies at the university level has tended to obscure any real understanding of what happens in courses organized in this way. Our nearly unique position in this kind of external program, being currently involved in the design, implementation, teaching, and evaluation of three separate external studies courses in three separate universities, has lead us to an analysis of the processes involved with External Studies.

We are interested in sharing this analysis for several reasons: we wish to shed some light on substantive issues, both positive and negative, about external studies; we wish to show the structure of each of these three courses, and identify and examine the assumptions on which they are based; we believe we have learned something about the nature of students in external programs; and we have developed some strategies we believe facilitate student learning comparable to that achieved on campus. Obviously we have a biased view about external studies courses. We believe they are working. We are also biased about external studies students. We believe they are generally more productive, more motivated, and more demanding of substance than many of their on-campus counterparts. There are some trade-offs in external teaching and learning which are necessary to teach these different students. We wish to discuss these trade-offs and show how we compensate for them.

The three programs with which one or both of us are attached:

1. National Ed.D. Program for Educational Leaders, Nova University (Florida);
2. University External Studies Program, University of Pittsburgh;
3. Field Centered Courses, Department of Early Childhood Education, Kent State University.

The Nova University Program is an external doctoral program. It takes a minimum of three calender years for completion by participants. Each

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participant is one of 25-30 members of a regional cluster. All members of a cluster take the eight substantive areas of study together. Each of the substantive areas lasts three months. Clusters do not meet during the summer, but in two of the three summers during which participants are enrolled, each must travel to Florida where, with a few other participants, a two-week intensive institute takes place. Participants, concurrent with the eight areas of study, do a series of practicums, i.e., change projects, in their home setting. Each cluster has a local coordinator who monitors what the students are doing. He also administers a local budget that is available to the students. These monies provide supplementary experiences and consultant help for the students' learning. Each group of lecturers prepares a basic and a recommended reading list. These books are maintained as a library in each cluster. The participants in the Nova Program tend to have backgrounds that differ from those students who enter campus based administrative training programs. In all cases the participants have a master's degree and administrative certification acceptable in their home state before they enter the program. In addition, they must have an administrative or supervisory role in an educational setting. The work setting serves as a learning laboratory for many of their substantive areas of study.

The External Studies Program, University of Pittsburgh, is not a program as much as it is an umbrella existing within the School of General Studies. This umbrella organization administratively supports the development and the teaching of individual external courses, taught by many professors from various schools, departments, and programs in the total university. Many of the courses were written using the P.I.C.¹ model as a base for helping professors organize their on-campus courses for external teaching. The program emerged from a recognition of the University's responsibility to provide higher education to those previously unable to attend classes because of family or job responsibilities, geographic isolation, or limited mobility. The average age of the U.E.S.P. student is 32 years; most of them have little opportunity to earn credit in any other way.

While it is not currently possible to earn a degree solely by taking External Studies courses, external degree programs within the School of General Studies are being developed in applied economics and urban management.² There are special administrative organizations and a well-organized student support system maintained as part of this program. These non-traditional students seem to need special support services to learn and survive the university bureaucratic thickets. All students in these external courses are encouraged to come on campus three times each term for interaction sessions with their teachers. Regional testing centers which contain resource materials are maintained in areas where students are concentrated. A 24-hour "hot line" telephone service is available to all students who have questions or problems. Professors are encouraged to be available for telephone calls at specified times each week. Almost all calls are returned within 24 hours.

¹See the paper of Doris T. Gow presented at the 1973 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association: "P.I.C.: A Process Model for the Individualization of Curricula."

²See the Semi-Annual Report (Spring, 1975) from University External Studies Program, University of Pittsburgh (mimeo).

The Field Centered Courses of the Department of Early Childhood Education (Kent State University) is the third program from which we will examine a course. This program began in the fall of 1975. The department began with one course, Child Study, with the intent to build a concentration of courses aimed at one specific audience--practicing day care, nursery educators in Ohio. This sequence of courses will be organized so that each course is self-contained and presented to the students in sequenced packages. Students come to campus three Saturdays per term. These courses can be applied to undergraduate degree credit if the students wish. They will also fit into developing certification requirements for day care workers. The professors in these programs also are available for phone calls and regularly exchange written communications with all students.

Some Important Issues with the External Studies Courses

Our primary concern in this paper is to compare courses from three external studies programs, all of which we have designed and currently are teaching: "Supervision" from Nova University; "Supervision in Education: Theory and Practice" from the University of Pittsburgh; and "Child Study" from Kent State University. The comparison will be based on the questions asked in the table below.

Table 1

SOME IMPORTANT ISSUES

Questions	PROGRAMS		
	Kent	Pittsburgh	Nova
Is the course designed for a specific audience?	Yes	Yes/No	Yes
Does the course link theory with practice?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Are the objectives of the course clearly specified for the student?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Are the students encouraged to help one another?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Are pre-assessment instruments utilized to identify the student's strengths and weaknesses?	No	Yes	Yes
Does the student complete the course at his/her own rate?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Does the student receive continuing feedback from the instructors?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Does the student attend "on-campus" seminars?	Yes	Yes	Yes/No

The first question -"Is the course developed for a specific audience?"- is an important question. The Nova University course and the Kent State University course have as their goal a common purpose: to help educators become competent in the positions they now have. The Pittsburgh course tries to help educators who are interested in supervision, but who may or may not now be carrying out a supervisory function. The Nova and Kent students can use their work environments as their learning laboratories since the skills they desire and the roles they carry out are congruent with one another. Those Pittsburgh students who do not have a supervisory role in the schools must use other environments as they practice supervisory skills. While the three courses share a common purpose, the linking of theory and practice, the possible degrees granted are diverse: B.A. to the "new career" educator at Kent; M.Ed./Ed.D./Ph.D.³ to the experienced educator at Pittsburgh and Ed.D. to the experienced administrator of Nova.

An element that is shared by all three courses is the concern of the designers that the students have the opportunity to link theory with practice.

The primary goal of Child Study (Kent) is to help you link theory with practice in areas related to children, ages day one through adolescence. Your task with each unit in this book is to gain in knowledge about a specific concept; you are then asked to do something with the concept: observe children, interview adults, interview professionals, interact with children. In most instances, your "doing" will be with children in your home/day care center/community.

The intellectual approaches and practical applications of the units (Nova) are made in and near your real life settings. Your continuing involvement in these settings gives you an outside measuring stick with which to judge the ideas and skills you are developing.

This course (Pittsburgh) intends to help you in the development of those specific skills you need to improve your supervisory practice.

An analysis of all of the activities found in the three courses demonstrates that the students attempt to link theory and practice by doing something in the field that is based on theory. Examples of activities from the three courses follow:

Child Study (Kent)

1. After reading about Kohlberg's theory of moral development, the student designs his/her own moral dilemma to use with elementary school age children, adolescents, and adults.
2. After analyzing an infant stimulation program, the students use activities from the program with infants.

³The Pittsburgh supervision course can be used as graduate credit for regular on-campus doctoral students.

3. After reading an introduction to a Piagetian description of conservation, the students conduct conservation experiments with young children.

Supervision (Nova)

1. After working through criteria for selecting a group to solve a task, the student must report on behaviors of the group selected.
2. After role-playing a supervisory conference using a suggested format, the student audio-tapes a real conference and analyzes its effectiveness.

Supervision (Pittsburgh)

1. After reading the theory of various verbal communications techniques, the student audio tapes his/her use of these techniques with real issues.
2. After analyzing decision making processes in his/her organization, the student proposes an improved decision making process for the organization.

The opportunity to link theory with practice is often lacking in on-campus courses. The undergraduate student has little access to the world of children; the graduate student must leave the world of children to study theory in the isolation of the "ivory tower."

The three courses share a common process of informing the students of the specific objective for each activity. While Riessman⁴ recommends this process for "new career" learners, such as the day care educators in the Kent course, we have found that all students benefit from this information. The sharing of the objectives allows the students to evaluate both their own performances and the purposes of the activities of the specific unit. The specificity of objectives seems to be particularly important for external studies students who do not have the day-to-day opportunity to ask for clarification from the instructor.

A related issue to the clarity of objectives is the type of pre-assessment instruments used in the courses. No formal pre-assessment instruments are used in the Kent course. All students are required to complete the same seven units and to choose two units from the remaining seven. This present weakness with the Kent course has not been a major problem since almost all of the 42 students were unfamiliar with the concepts studied.⁵ But, as these students enroll in other external courses, they will have acquired competencies from the Child Study course that will be applicable to these courses. Therefore, we plan to design pre-assessment instruments for this and other courses within the Kent program. The Nova course has a self-assessment instrument as does the Pittsburgh course. A portion of the Nova instrument is in Figure 1 below.

⁴See Frank Riessman's book: New Careers for the Poor, New York: Free Press, 1965.

⁵Day care educators in Ohio have previously had little opportunity for formal learning.

Figure 1 here

The student's task with this instrument is to review the objectives and competencies for all the units (Columns 1 and 3). The student's self-selected "prescription" is based on the combination of a low level of mastery (Column 2), a high level of need (Column 4), and high priority (Column 6). The student chooses to complete the six units from a total of 35 which have the highest priority. The Nova course has a post-assessment form which must be completed both by a colleague of the student and by his/her hierarchical supervisor. A sample of this post-assessment titled, 'Certification of Competence Form,' follows.

Figure 2 here

The Pittsburgh course has a pre-assessment instrument that differs from the one in the Nova Course in specificity, but not in intent. Students are first asked diagnostic questions about their level of mastery for each major area of competencies taught in the course. Their answers are keyed to specific units in the course which teach these competencies. These pre-assessment instruments allow the courses to be individualized according to the competencies and needs of the students (Pittsburgh, Nova). With this type of assessment no two students need complete the same set of units. The Kent students, after finishing the required seven units, make a self-assessment based on interest and need when they select two of the remaining seven units to complete. All three courses are also individualized on the basis of the rate in which the students complete the course. The Kent course serves as a good example: three students completed the 13-week course in ten weeks; slightly over one-half of the group completed the course within the term; the others will need additional time. Since the instructors in the Kent course (and the Pittsburgh and Nova courses) are concerned with mastery, the students will not be punished for finishing after the term ends. But, no student passes either the course or out of the program without satisfactory completion of mastery.

The receiving of rapid, constructive feedback by the students is critical in external studies courses (and all learning experiences). This feedback comes from numerous directions. The first direction, and one that is ignored in most learning experiences, is the feedback of students to students. The instructors in the Kent course grouped the students by geographic area. With this type of grouping, the instructors were able to recommend that student A contact student B with a specific question about a unit. Student B may be the "expert," i.e., s/he mastered the concept; student A will then have the opportunity to help another student who has a question about a concept that student A has already mastered. This process has worked most efficiently where two or more students were employed by the same day care center. Additional processes for the "student help student"⁶ process are being developed. The Nova course uses the "student help student" process formally with the "Certification of Competence Form" (See Figure 2). Attempts to use this helping process with the Nova program also consists of students sharing projects in clusters, students and colleagues giving feedback in formal ways

⁶See the book by A. Gartner, et. al.: Children Teach Children, New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

in many of the units, and the post-assessment competency process. In the Pittsburgh program, students all have one another's addresses and telephone numbers. They are encouraged to contact each other. Students further advanced in the course have a formal requirement to criticize and give feedback to at least two beginning students. Many students passively resist this later process, but most say they see its value.

The primary sources of student feedback are the instructors of the courses. The most frequently used form of feedback is the written comments made by the instructors on the students' completed units. These comments tend to focus on strengths of the responses. If a student does not understand a specific part of the unit, the instructor poses questions to which the student will respond. The intent of the questions (and suggestions for additional study) is to help the student attain mastery for the unit. Students are encouraged to write and/or telephone the instructors with any questions they have while completing the unit. A written commitment was made by the instructors responsible for the three courses to respond to students' telephone questions within 24 hours. The Kent instructors made a specific time commitment to have all units evaluated and returned within a week of their arrival on campus. A third type of feedback occurs during the three on-campus seminars. The content of the seminars includes concepts that are at a high level of difficulty and/or interest to the students. Time is planned within each seminar session for students to meet individually with the instructors. A pattern of interaction that we are beginning to observe, and one that needs to be examined systematically, is that the external studies students may have more total "individual" contact with the instructors than their peers who are enrolled in on-campus courses.

We have examined the issues raised on Table 1. Two major conclusions can be drawn from the above analysis: One is that the learning environment can be expanded to include the school-community setting of the students enrolled; and, external studies as a format can be designed to match the needs and learning styles of many kinds of students ranging from the "new career" to the doctoral level.

Figure 1
Self-Assessment Instrument

PLANNING CHART FOR SELF-SELECTION OF COMPETENCIES TO BE DEVELOPED AS PART OF THE SUPERVISION MODULE

Direct Interaction Skills Used to Improve Instruction and Learning

Column 1 Skill and Competency List	Column 2 Level of Mastery	Column 3 Units and Objectives	Column 4 Level of Need	Column 5 Suggested Experiences for Evaluation of Competence	Column 6 Priority
A. Interpersonal 1. Organize task groups		Unit 1 Getting A Group Together Page 77 You will: 1. Develop a set of criteria for selecting the members of a task group. 2. Apply these criteria to several situations; some simulated, and some real.		1. List the criteria you have for selecting a task group. 2. Share these criteria with a colleague and defend them until your colleague agrees with these criteria. 3. Select a group for your next task, and evaluate how well they perform the task.	
2. Help task groups set goals.		3. Organize and plan for the first meeting of the group.			
3. Analyze and help others analyze the processes of task group.		Unit 2 What's Happening Here? Page 86 You will: 1. Develop several techniques to assess the workings of a task group.		1. Compare what you wrote in your original paragraph to what was reported in the observation.	

Figure 2
Post-Assessment Instrument
NOVA UNIVERSITY
SUPERVISION MODULE
Certification of Competence Form¹

Dates of Supervision Module _____

Date of examination _____

Name of candidate being examined _____

Candidate's professional position _____

Name of person filling this form _____

Relationship of person filling this form to candidate (fellow candidate,
supervisor of candidate, working colleague)

A. Candidate being examined has explained to me each of the following:

- _____ 1. The organization of the Nova Program.
- _____ 2. The organization of the Supervision Module.
- _____ 3. The Planning Chart and its Functions in Chapter 4 of the Study Guide.
- _____ 4. The purpose of this competency examination.
- _____ 5. The fact that I am going to spend at least 1-2 hours with this candidate to review his competency demonstration and will state the procedures I used with this candidate.
- _____ 6. The fact that I will have to fill out this form in some detail for the candidate to be certified in this module of his doctoral program.

B. The candidate has listed the following units as those he/she agreed to complete before this competency examination.

Title

Unit number: _____	_____
_____	_____

C. The Procedures I used for conducting the examination were:

¹This form is to be filled out by the person doing the competency examination. You may not perform a competency examination for a fellow candidate who is going to perform the same function for you.